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# STUDENT TEACHERS' UNDERSTANDING OF ACHIEVEMENT – AN EXPLORATION

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Jane Jones investigates student teachers' understanding of achievement – both personal and professional – and arrives at some illuminating and creative insights.

## Perceptions of achievement

Lifetimes are framed by milestones of achievement, from the celebration of a baby's first utterance and steps to personal and professional achievements thereafter in life. One of the student teachers who are the focus of this study about understanding achievement cited a personal achievement:

One of my best achievements was winning my first Latin American and Ballroom competition in the Blackpool Tower Ballroom. I was 12 but I still remember it vividly.

whilst another referred to:

Getting top grades in my GCSEs and A-levels felt like such an incredible achievement because not only was there a feeling of success and hard work paying off but also of relief and satisfaction at having been so diligent and determined for so long and now experiencing the reward.

Everyone has their experiences, perceptions and interpretations of what achievement/underachievement is, but there is little consensus according to Smith (2003), even after much investment in researching differential achievement.

Going back to the origins in an etymological dictionary shows the meaning of the word 'achievement' coming from the 15<sup>th</sup> century French word *achever* that meant simply 'to complete' something. Over time, the word has become the emotionally charged term that it is today. It is a word that has spawned a vast canon of literature as well as a lucrative business industry evidenced in airport popular psychology best sellers of the 'self-improvement'/'aim high' kind, on how to achieve better, take it to higher levels and avoid the swamps of low-level achievement and failure. External expectations of achievement serve to differentiate between 'high achievers' and 'low achievers'. (Are there medium achievers? And if so, is 'medium achievement' satisfactory?) Defining levels and norms is highly contested. Furthermore, societal inequalities that can be difficult to eradicate mean that some contexts thwart achievement whilst others, such as education, can be favourable to it, as Dunne and Gazeley (2008) and the OECD (2010) indicate.

## Reflecting on the concept of achievement

In my career as a linguist in teacher education, after substantial periods of teaching in schools, I have sought to achieve my goal to support generations of student teachers ('students') to achieve successfully their goal of entering the profession as confident and competent new teachers. In this article, I explore their conceptions and understandings of achievement in order to obtain insights about how their understandings may impact on their teaching. The students are at the front line of external measurement in training arrangements. This measurement relates to them as learners with regard to their own professional achievement and to the learning outcomes of the pupils they teach when on school practice. They are

accountable in many ways for a range of teaching standards, a great many targets and a wide and ever expanding panoply of professional hoops through which they are required to jump, each of which is documented and validated by an external source. The students who are the focus of this study were given thinking space, integral to the course, to reflect on their understanding of the broad construct of achievement. In this article, I draw on the students' reflective accounts of what achievement means to them using their own words, words that provide rich data that are, to a large extent, left to speak for themselves.

Some 15 languages student teachers had written their reflections in response to a series of prompts about their understanding of achievement. This was a routine critical reflection at the end of successful completion of their first (of two) school practices on a secondary PGCE course. The students represent different backgrounds, gender and school placements. They constitute the usual gender profile of language teachers, two males and 13 females. Their ages range from 24 to 31. They are all well qualified, with knowledge of two to four foreign languages and thus bring multilingual skills into multilingual urban schools. They have been out and about in the world of study, leisure, work and charity activities prior to teacher training. The first two prompts asked them to define 'achievement' generally, then in educational terms, in their own words. The next prompts asked for practical examples of what they considered to be their achievements with whole classes and then with individual pupils on school practice. The students ended their reflection with the sharing of what personal achievements they were proud of. They reported that they found this personal reflection valuable as it helped them to crystallise some of their actual achievements and re-live, through what Bolton (2001:4) refers to as 'replay', the feelings associated with those achievements.

### **Understanding 'achievement'**

The students wrote about what 'achievement' meant to them. Here is an illustrative sample of their comments:

Reaching a point that was previously deemed unobtainable and being able to accomplish a task through hard work, commitment and perseverance.

For me, achievement is when you have successfully completed or made progress with something, e.g. a task or a goal.

Achievement is related to improvement, facing one's challenges by getting out of our comfort zone and turning our weaknesses into strengths.

Achievement in any sense of the word could mean to attain fully or in part goals and targets which could be academic, personal, professional or social.

Reaching a goal that has been set and all the gratification that comes with achieving the goal.

Achievement is the act of accomplishing a professional/educational goal or ambition though personal achievements are just as important to me.

Achievement is an emotion for me, more than anything. A feeling. The feeling of having excelled, pushed the boundaries, gone farther than you previously felt possible.

These sample comments (there were many other similar ones) highlight, in a number of ways, a common core idea of challenge and goal, and of something that requires efforts. It can be felt as movement towards some goal, and puts one in a different place, a new zone, culminating in an achievement. Furthermore, the impact of the achievement is felt emotionally, it is 'gratifying' and 'linked to personal happiness' according to one student, and becomes a positive reference point on which to draw. On this point, Stoll, Fink and Earl (2003:37) write that learning 'triggers a range of emotions' and that achieving a flow creates 'a feeling almost of rapture'. The students' understanding of achievement appears to be both emotional as a sense of

achievement and quantifiable in reaching a standard, seen as process as well as an outcome on completion.

### **Achievement in educational terms**

Defining achievement in educational terms was the next point of reflection, as illustrated in the following sample of comments:

This means identifying your strengths whilst improving on your weaknesses in order to fulfil your potential.

In educational terms, achievement means qualitatively expanding one's subject knowledge, with the intention of improving and mastering a higher level of competence in a particular subject/field.

Achievement in educational terms is idiosyncratic and very much differs from student to student. It can simply be understanding a single topic through persistence to achieving an A\* grade in an exam.

To me, it is a differentiated term and about achieving their goal. It could be about moving from an F to an A or mastering a skill or gaining confidence in speaking.

It relates to the targets set by school/national curriculum/examination.

I think it can refer to a pupil's attainment, for instance, levels. It could also be that a pupil is making progress. This does not mean that it just has to apply to classwork as it could be that a particular pupil is a member of a sports team and their achievement could be scoring a goal or a musical pupil giving a good performance.

In my opinion, it is too often associated with getting good grades. However, there is another type of achievement which I associate more with everyday life with short-term results but which can be very powerful because this can keep you engaged with a subject, make it more rewarding and eventually lead to the more traditional desired 'academic' achievement.

In these reflections about educational achievement, there are frequent references to external, quantifiable measures of assessment: grades, levels, examinations and the national curriculum, for example, reflecting the students' awareness of assessment discourses and engagement in what Stobart (2008:1) calls the 'powerful activity' of assessment in schools. The comments also highlight a process perspective relating to the irregular but progressive contours of learning with reference to verbs - movement again - such as improving, progressing, expanding (knowledge), mastering and overcoming, where the students emphasise the effort and perseverance needed of the learners. A focus on the different ways in which individual achievement can be experienced comes through in references to differentiated outcome and type of target: a pupil moving up a grade, for example, another scoring a match goal, another overcoming one particular learning obstacle. This introduces an element of competition into the understanding, either against others or as a challenge to oneself to achieve higher.

### **Achievements with the student teachers' classes**

Loughran (2002) asserts that student teachers' reflection on and search for meaning is most effective when it is linked to 'contextual anchors'. I was looking next to see how the students related the rhetoric and exhortations of achievement previously described to their real contexts of teaching, especially as they are accustomed to continuously reflecting on and evaluating the learning outcomes and achievements of their classes. These are examples of what they wrote:

Year 8 Spanish - understood and used the future tense using *voy + a + infinitive*. Pupils were asked to complete a writing exercise at the end of the sequence. All pupils could do it ranging from just using the 'I' form to using different pronouns.

A Year 7 class was becoming demotivated in learning new vocabulary on the topic of *Chez Moi* and as part of their homework they had to research a French-speaking country. One girl said she had enjoyed researching the Congo given that many of her relatives lived there. This research motivated the pupils to speak more French once they began to find similarities between cultures.

Year 9 pupils were introduced to a new grammatical structure and set of lexical items that could be used to talk about the school of the future. After practising these in class as well as using them as a springboard for independent thought and language use, their achievement was to be able to use the simple future which they had not known before, and use it independently in conjunction with new lexical items and personal opinions to say whether the school would be better than today.

When I started teaching the Year 12 group, making them speak was incredibly difficult. They were shying away for fear of making a mistake. This was their achievement, being able to sustain a conversation and feeling more comfortable to speak about some topics.

Year 7 - from the beginning of the year only being able to copy words, everyone in the class is now able to form full sentences using opinions and adjectives, advancing from Level 1 to Levels 3 or 4. I know this because of their results on the tracking documents and grid reports.

My Year 8 tutor group managed to raise the most money for charity by selling raffle tickets. The announcement was made in assembly and the group looked very proud.

I had prepared a lesson plan at the weekend for my tough Year 10 GCSE then the night before the class, I had a new idea to make it more exciting so I changed the plan and created new activities, new PowerPoint, etc. The lesson was a complete success and all the girls were willingly participating and were learning and having a good time to the point that when some of the disruptive ones were interrupting the flow, I did not have to tell them off, the pupils were doing it themselves.

All but one account reflect the discourse that surrounds the teaching of languages. This is evidenced in references to learning how to manipulate and combine language structures, for example, use tenses, create full sentences, speaking skills, and that language teachers say are necessary to progress/expand subject knowledge as previously mentioned. The idea of challenge is central and reflects individual and differentiated efforts as contributions to whole class achievement. The challenges are varied: linguistic, cultural and social and are met through a variety of activities that engender effort, commitment, sometimes struggle and enjoyment. The students link achievement to increased motivation and confidence, associating a target with a sense of achievement. They have thus sought to employ motivational teaching techniques as suggested by Dörnyei (2001), for example, and with whose work the students are familiar. They reveal some of the techniques they used to create an achieving classroom environment that includes careful lesson planning to meet student need and interest, differentiated learning activities, cultural learning and formative assessment techniques.

The students engage with grades and levels without over-privileging them. They are required as a matter of course to evaluate pupil learning in relation to achieving a learning objective target, drawing on a range of evidence that includes some quantitative measure for the whole class but also noticing individual achievements.

### **Achievements of individual pupils in an inclusive classroom**

Although the student teachers teach whole classes for the main part, and have to record, report on and account for the achievements of their classes, these classes, of course, comprise individual learners and it is to a consideration of how student teachers understand individual pupil achievement that I now turn.

The students in this study have developed considerable expertise in creating an inclusive learning environment that challenges all learners. On account of the continuous inputs from inclusion specialists in

the university and the experience of school colleagues, the students have become extraordinarily sensitive to teaching in a way that stretches the more able pupils and ensures a measure of achievement by all pupils, whatever their learning difference and need. This sensitivity is evidenced in the following examples:

Year 9 Students had been using *il y a* without knowing how it was constructed. I asked one student to think what the verb was in the phrase and she managed to deduce that it was *a* from *avoir*. As a result she then went on to conjugate the phrase into *il y aura*, demonstrating her linguistic progression and expansion of her subject knowledge.

A Year 9 low ability disruptive pupil recently worked very hard and completed the work to a good level, enabling her to improve from an E to a D perhaps because I gave her more differentiated work.

A very able student in Year 8 made a big step forward in her French; she had internalised how to say 'I think that' having picked this up quite randomly from hearing me use it. Impressive.

I took a pupil in the top set of Year 9, a very disruptive pupil and ringleader of poor class behaviour, aside to understand the reasons for his poor conduct - I found that it mainly came from frustration with 'not understanding Spanish'. I made a deal with him that I would give him extra help at break times to get him up to speed if he cooperated in the lessons and didn't disrupt them. The change in attitude, effort and attainment was outstanding. By the end of my time at the school he was able to form the past, present and conditional tense on a par with some of the brightest students in the class. I believe here that this shows behavioural and academic achievements.

A Year 8 high attainer but usually disruptive girl was sitting defiantly, arms crossed, huffing and puffing, not doing any work. But I kept going to her and saying that the work I had seen was really good and it was a shame. I was always warm to her and didn't judge. After three weeks, she started to put up her hand and once I saw she had done a really good piece of work and I praised her and she smiled at me and said 'thank you, miss.'

A Year 9 pupil with dyslexia was able to spell the word 'garganta' after initially struggling and when he was able to split the word into simple syllables, he reached his goal (gar-gan-ta).

This child was colour-blind and unable to access many activities as she couldn't see overlaying colours. By providing her with black and white resources, she was able to access the same information as the rest and started to participate really well in pair and group work giving a set of expanded answers about her family in Spanish for example.

A Year 8 pupil with ADHD made progress in his behaviour and his learning outcomes. I broke his learning down into small steps and gave him a prompt sheet. By the end he was able to write a paragraph on what he did at school yesterday, accurately forming the past tense for more than one subject and using irregular past participles, taking pride in his work, even writing "Good boy Peter 😊" on his worksheet.

One very able girl mastered three tenses, present, past, future and used them in a writing exercise and went on to challenge herself by incorporating the conditional independently after I presented the challenge to the class.

These, then, are examples of perceived achievements, great and small, linguistic and social or behavioural, often in combination. The above comments (there were many other similar ones) show the degree of understanding of each child's need and capability and the corresponding action taken by the student teachers to enable the pupils to make what for some might appear to be quite modest achievements but which are, the students assert, quite substantial achievements for those pupils. Many of the pupils, it is highlighted, experienced a struggle of some kind and faced considerable challenge. With sensitive support and personalised MFL (Modern Foreign Languages) learning strategies with appropriate challenge as advocated by, for example, Jones (2013), work with which the students are familiar, the students claim that pupils' subject knowledge achievement was inextricably linked to a growth in confidence. The students have

overall identified and encouraged achievement with high and low ability pupils, pupils with learning differences, shy pupils and disruptive children who the students considered their greatest challenge but also one of their greatest achievements.

### **The student teachers' own achievements at the end of first teaching practice**

The students are asked to reflect on their learning at key points during their training and the end of their first teaching practice represents a milestone, thus an appropriate juncture to consider achievements to date. Their comments on this fell under thematic headings as illustrated below:

#### *Pupil progress - formal quantifiable achievements*

Guiding my pupils through a sequence and seeing such positive scores in the post-test.

Making work accessible to all learners regardless of their level and seeing them all progress.

Seeing pupils with learning difficulties and often disengaged working hard and realising that they 'actually understand French' as one pupil said.

Recording very good marks for my classes in the departmental mark book.

The students rapidly develop a sound assessment literacy on the course, being attuned to and practised in assessment as integral to good teaching continuously as is evidenced in the comments below. They are accustomed to looking for evidence of learning and are, as one student commented 'comfortable around assessment'.

#### *Good relationships - establishing a rapport*

Creating a good rapport with all of my students and forging good professional relationships with members of staff, demonstrated through participating in the staff pantomime and taking extra-curricular activities.

The connection I established with colleagues. I participated regularly in weekly meetings and felt involved as a member of the team. Second is the relationship with the pupils. Creating a positive learning environment is essential to provide opportunities for participation and progress.

Feeling respected and genuinely appreciated by the pupils. They reacted with disappointment that I was leaving them in the middle of their course. I bumped into some of the girls in the corridor and they told me they would miss me. I wanted to give them a hug.

Establishing professional, friendly relationships with the department and other staff that I came into contact with. I usually get nervous about this sort of thing so felt proud that I had managed to do it.

Comments on the development of good relationships and gaining confidence were in the majority although I was surprised at the students' initial apprehension about this. The research by Wubbels and Korthagen (1990) with student teachers highlighted ongoing opportunities for student teacher reflexivity during their training as beneficial in the development of good relationships.

#### *Confidence - professional*

Feeling confident in front of my classes.

My final week and the number of compliments from pupils and wishes for me to stay.

I got the school Teacher Excellence award on my placement for fantastic progress in my teaching.

The feedback from my tutor when she came to observe. It was a very hard class and I was nervous. It couldn't have gone much better. The children were great and I was delighted. I felt this was a turning point.

The students on this course were resilient and personally confident individuals but teaching practice proved the great leveller that it always is. They needed time and constructive feedback from mentors and the pupils themselves to enable them to develop their own confidence.

Coping - a personal achievement

The first time I finished a whole lesson with my Year 8 without writing anyone's name on the board or threatening anyone with a detention.

Finally enjoying my most difficult class after introducing games and more interactive activities.

Teaching French, my second language, without being a nervous wreck.

Getting through it! I'm still standing!

Resonating with the views expressed in the first section on understanding achievement, the completion of this teaching practice, with hard work and not without struggle, was a watershed moment of achievement. Dweck (2000:153), in this regard, writes of the need to learn 'the essential skills that we use to help ourselves when tasks are long, complex or unpleasant' with reference to 'self-regulation' in task-completion. Whilst not particularly unpleasant, teaching practice is certainly long and complex. Yet, the student teachers' sense of pride at completing teaching practice is tangible and ultimately. It was much to do with the pupils' achievements which in itself is a considerable achievement, given that MFL is not always the most popular subject in the curriculum. As trainee teachers, they are highly attuned to the learning process and at a unique point of closeness with their pupils in their career on their respective learning journeys. They are acutely aware of their own achievements evidenced in the improvements of their pupils which the students see partly as a success of their actions. Linked to this, one student cited her sense of achievement at feeling like 'a real teacher not a student teacher', a moment not unlike the sense of achievement felt by pupils, and one that enabled her to take agency to position herself as feeling more fully part of the 'community of practice' (of language teachers) as elaborated by Lave and Wenger (1991).

### **Achievements in the students' lives of which they are 'proud'**

I was inspired to ask the students about personally meaningful achievement. Interestingly, this drew on previous research that colleagues and I conducted with children in Jersey (Jones, 2010). So in the same way, in this current work, I explored with students: the question "What have you achieved?" followed by: "What work are you proud of?" The final prompt asked the students in this study to share personal experiences that gave them a sense of achievement. This was designed to enable them to identify their understanding of achievement that was truly meaningful to them as individuals. It is a question that the students themselves also use with their pupils when they strive to develop the pupils' understanding of their very own achievements.

The personal response from the students to this question fell mainly into three broad categories of which I provide two examples each. The most prominent concerned 'travel and adventures':

I travelled to Peru and worked in an animal rescue shelter in the middle of the Amazon rainforest, an unforgettable experience which pushed my boundaries for comfort and security'.

At the age of 17 I had the opportunity to go to South Africa with a Youth Music Group. We helped fund a music centre to enable young children to learn to read music and play a musical instrument. The experience was extremely rewarding as I had the chance to help young people less privileged than myself so it was an achievement for them as well as the Group.

The next category referred to 'academic achievement':



Completing my degree. I found it really difficult to cope with the step up at the beginning of the course. I dreaded the year abroad as I am a home person and I struggled being away but I made it with a good degree'.

My first class degree then my distinction in my Masters.

Sporting achievements', the next category, were many:

Winning the 1500m city athletics competition and league. I got to stand on top of the podium at the city stadium where they'd held a lot of top athletics events'.

When I was five, learning to swim and dive into a pool and sea without armbands with my father was a feeling that I recall of great achievement.

Some students also identified overcoming personal and family struggles as personal achievements. Together, they are all examples that show striving for personal targets, team work, selflessness and looking out for others, and a sense of pride, values that reflect the students' personalities and impact their developing teaching identities. The students have transferred these values to the classroom in their encouraging of both individuals and whole class efforts to achieve goals. The student teachers' examples have given insights into how they do this, teaching in a way that is enabling of success, prioritising the development of a good rapport and dialogue and, crucially, supporting individuals to develop self-confidence and self-worth. One student wrote on this point: "Your own achievement cannot be measured by anyone else apart from yourself but others will often give you guidance along the way". Past achievements also form a map of references for an understanding of how to inspire a sense of achievement in others.

### **Conclusion: 're-assessing, redefining and re-imagining achievement'**

There are many emotively loaded terms used in educational discourses. Achievement is a prime contender. This small study shows that these student teachers understand achievement as multi-layered and complex. It is a complexity that goes beyond simple definition, e.g. in terms of examination results, although the students are well aware that an important part of their job is to 'get results'. One student likened achievement to a road map, where

having finished one particular journey and feeling you have reached your destination although the goal posts are ever changing and the ideas of achievement and what it may signify to the individual may have to be continually re-assessed, redefined and re-imagined.

The student teachers in this study seem well able to comprehend the complexities of achievement for their understanding and interpretation of it is nuanced and wide-ranging, multiple shades of achievement, or differential achievement, in line with the views on this of Gorard and Smith (2004). The students consider achievement as inclusive of all pupils and that it can reside in the very smallest of steps:

It can be the smallest success but it means a lot to you and you have worked hard to achieve this particularly goal, it is a great achievement.

as well as in outstanding achievements of abler pupils:

An able but shy Year 12 pupil on a trip to the BFI with encouragement managed to make an excellent point in front of the whole group – about 300 people- about the Spanish Civil War. He was complimented by peers and teachers for a great achievement.

Having experienced achievement themselves leads them to want to support their pupils to experience, in different ways, such self-affirming feelings, as one student wrote:

I'd say that achievement means experiencing great joy and satisfaction at having made a start on the journey towards success, in its many different guises or having completed the journey.

These students have achieved much for and with their pupils on teaching practice. They have recognised differential achievement in the very act of identifying the achievement of some pupils. However they have yet to be confronted with the full range, magnitude and challenge of differential achievement and underachievement that they will find in schools as Francis and Wong (2013) assert and will need to think further about differences in ability, also gender, and socio-economic background and achievement. Yet the assertions and hopes expressed by the student teachers inspire faith in them to meet the challenge. In investing in creating good relationships with their pupils, the students show an awareness of how what Gewirtz (1998) calls 'relationship-based interventions', based on high expectations and trust, can lead to a narrowing of the achievement gap.

The students have individual personal experiences from education and other fields and from these they bring a wealth of valuable skills. The ballroom dancer learnt the notions of discipline and perseverance as well as enjoyment; the 'adventurers' grew through the challenge of risk-taking; the many who have undertaken charity work - working for and with others – have learnt empathy for the needs of other people and an awareness of social justice. Those doing well in academia found this was not without very hard work and occasional struggle. They have affirmed their beliefs and maintained and transferred their skills, knowledge and understanding into the classroom, reconciling the demands of school and national expectations for academic achievement with the creation of opportunities to make accessible to their pupils the joy of achievement in various guises.

In order to avoid the situation of new teachers falling into routinised practice, and to be able to maintain a sense of their own achievement in what can become a sterile target-setting culture, they need varied and continuing professional development opportunities, goals and challenges in order to sustain the high level of commitment they display. Day, Elliot and Kington (2005) identified systemic obstacles in sustaining new teachers' commitment as they progressed throughout their career. The importance of new teachers having spaces to continue to reflect on achievement so that they can reference again the feelings evoked by their own achievements, cannot be over-emphasised.

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